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Well-suited for the CIA—Perhaps

In trying to work out his designs for the Central Intelligence Agency, President Carter has been full of surprises. His first—the nomination of Theodore Sorensen to be director—turned out to be his first major defeat before Congress, when Mr. Sorensen was driven from the field by a conservative-liberal Senate coalition. Prospects mentioned for the job since then have included Bill Moyers, a television journalist and former press secretary to President Johnson, and retired Lt. Gen. James Gavin, who, though 70 years of age, is eminently qualified. His incisive early appraisals of the Vietnam mistake identified General Gavin as a man attuned to both reality and responsibility, and his qualities of leadership are legend.

But Mr. Carter passed over the above-mentioned prospects to choose a man unknown to the general public and to a great many politicians as well, Admiral Stansfield Turner, commander of Allied Forces in Southern Europe. And, while awaiting further revelation of the admiral's thoughts on critical subjects, we view the appointment with cautious optimism. Certainly he should suffer no degree of disqualification simply by virtue of being from the military, as a few liberal lawmakers seem to think. General Gavin, as we said, is a military man with an excellent perspective, and so may be Stansfield Turner.

The fact is that any reasoned final judgment must await his confirmation hearing, which begins February 22 before the Senate Intelligence Committee. He should be subjected to the most searching interrogation on those questions which have been central to the CIA scandals of recent times. The country has to know his views on covert operations, in which the CIA has meddled flagrantly in the politics of other nations, and on its past practices of intruding into the lives and running over the rights of American citizens here at home, to the point of illegal breakins and other acts of contempt for civil authority. His qualification should hang on his commitment to the singular task of intelligence-gathering abroad, strictly within the CIA charter.

Apart from the unknown answers to

chews the old notion that the CIA is a law and government unto itself, Admiral Turner seems an admirable choice. His mental powers appear spectacular, only partly from the fact that he graduated so much higher in his Annapolis class than did Jimmy Carter in the same class. Some say his management and organizational skills are equally spectacular, and this is important, for the CIA, to be reformed, needs someone who knows how to get a grip on a huge and intricate bureaucracy.

And, from his record, Admiral Turner is a man of innovative disposition; as president of the Naval War College he shook things up and, for the first time in its history, brought in speakers of diverse ideologies to lecture. He has written critically of the practice of telling Congress horror stories about sinking American power in order to get larger military appropriations. And, as a Rhodes scholar with an Oxford degree in philosophy, politics and economics, he seems to have a far wider breadth than your ordinary admiral. We await his hearing, hopefully.